

**Congress of the United States**  
**Washington, DC 20515**

February 19, 2021

Mark Zuckerberg  
Chairman and Chief Executive Officer  
Facebook, Inc.  
1601 Willow Rd.  
Menlo Park, CA 94025

Dear Mr. Zuckerberg:

We write to express deep concern regarding extremist ideology on Facebook and the growing threat of disinformation campaigns targeting veterans and military servicemembers.

As you know, on January 6, an armed mob of insurrectionists stormed the U.S. Capitol. In the days following this unprecedented attack, reports and ongoing investigations have shed a disturbing light on the involvement of military veterans and servicemembers in the violent insurrection. An NPR analysis has found that nearly one in five people charged so far in connection with the attack on the U.S. Capitol have served or are currently serving in the U.S. military.<sup>1</sup> These findings indicate that of more than 140 individuals currently facing charges for their alleged involvement in the attack, *nearly twenty percent appeared to have a military history*.

The events of that day left six people dead and many more injured, including Ashli Babbitt, an Air Force veteran who was fatally shot by police as she attempted to breach the broken window of a barricaded door to the Speaker's Lobby of the Capitol. Ms. Babbitt's extensive social media activity and subsequent reporting paint a picture of a struggling veteran and her descent into the world of QAnon conspiracy theories that would ultimately lead to her death. We must do better for our veterans and servicemembers by protecting them from the dangerous infection that is disinformation online.

Just a month before the attack, in December 2020, the House Veterans' Affairs Committee issued a report titled *Hijacking Our Heroes: Exploiting Veterans Through Disinformation on Social Media*. This report included findings and recommendations based on an earlier hearing on the nature and scope of threats posed to the veteran community through disinformation on social media. The report found what we saw play out in the case of Ashli Babbitt – that veterans and military servicemember communities are particularly targeted by malicious actors online in order

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<sup>1</sup> "Nearly 1 in 5 Defendants in Capitol Riot Cases Served in the Military." *NPR* online. January 21, 2021.  
<https://www.npr.org/2021/01/21/958915267/nearly-one-in-five-defendants-in-capitol-riot-cases-served-in-the-military>.

to misappropriate their voices, authority and credibility for the dissemination of political propaganda and “fake news.”<sup>2</sup> Veterans are often targeted because they have a high propensity to be politically engaged and carry significant credibility and influence in their communities, both online and offline, especially on issues related to patriotism, national security, defense and public service. Further, nearly one-third of the federal workforce is composed of veterans, which also makes the targeting of the military and veteran population a means to jeopardize a range of federal agencies.

When you pair this vulnerability to disinformation online with the way Facebook presents information to its users, by continuing to direct them to pages and views that reinforce existing biases, it is clear what a large role social media platforms played in the attack on the Capitol.

Facebook is the largest social media platform and its significant reach across multiple popular applications provides unparalleled influence in the realm of online communication. We appreciate that Facebook has taken certain steps recently to combat disinformation and extremist content on its platform.<sup>3</sup> However, according to a report from one nonprofit watchdog organization, private Facebook groups spent months communicating, coordinating, and advising one another about their plans to travel to the Capitol on January 6, specifically to participate in an attempt to “take down” the U.S. government.<sup>4</sup> While Facebook has maintained that it uses tools to detect and remove violating content within private groups, these groups can still contain vast networks of disinformation that have been built up over many years.

In order to address this complex issue and take concerted and sustained actions to combat extremism and disinformation campaigns targeting veterans and military servicemembers online, we must have a full understanding of the nature and scope of the problem. Therefore, we respectfully request that you provide responses to the following questions:

1. How many private or public groups associated with veterans, military servicemembers, or veterans service organizations did Facebook identify for violating content that was detected and/or removed in association with misinformation about the 2020 election or the attack on the Capitol?
2. How many user accounts associated with veterans or military servicemembers were targeted by accounts that were later removed in association with extremist groups responsible for the attack on the Capitol?
3. Did Facebook identify any fraudulent accounts or disinformation campaigns perpetrated by foreign actors in this context?

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<sup>2</sup> U.S. House. Committee on Veterans’ Affairs. *Hijacking Our Heroes: Exploiting Veterans Through Disinformation on Social Media* (2020). <https://veterans.house.gov/imo/media/doc/Hijacking%20Our%20Heroes.pdf>.

<sup>3</sup> Elizabeth Dwoskin, “Facebook’s Sandberg deflected blame for Capitol riot, but new evidence shows how platform played role,” *The Washington Post*, January 13, 2021, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/technology/2021/01/13/facebook-role-in-capitol-protest/>.

<sup>4</sup> Tech Transparency Project, “Capitol Attack Was Months in the Making on Facebook,” January 19, 2021, <https://www.techtransparencyproject.org/articles/capitol-attack-was-months-making-facebook>.

4. To what extent did Facebook communicate and collaborate with law enforcement to identify potential threats prior to January 6?
  - a. To what extent was the sharing of information voluntary or provided upon request from law enforcement?
  - b. To what extent did Facebook collaborate with other social media platforms to share and exchange information on content associated with extremist groups or propaganda?
5. To what extent has Facebook engaged directly with veterans service organizations (VSOs) regarding disinformation targeting veterans?
  - a. Will Facebook commit to strengthening communication and partnerships with VSOs to collaborate on efforts to address extremism and disinformation campaigns targeting veterans and military servicemembers?

Sincerely,



Kathleen M. Rice (NY-04)  
Member of Congress

Mark Takano (CA-41)  
Member of Congress

Marcy Kaptur (OH-09)  
Member of Congress

Marc A. Veasey (TX-33)  
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